

Dinner Remarks, Kazuo Ikawa, Director, Citizens' Disaster Prevention
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Mobilization After the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake

My name is Kazuo Ikawa and I am the Director of the Citizens' Disaster Prevention Planning Department of the Kobe City Citizens' Service Bureau.

Speaking for all the citizens of Kobe I would like to take this opportunity to express our deep gratitude for the generous support and assistance we received from the people of the United States of America and from many other countries around the world.

That assistance gave much encouragement to the people of Kobe, whose lives had been shattered by the earthquake, and laid the foundation for the subsequent reconstruction of our devastated city.

From almost the moment the earthquake struck, I was involved in the rescue and care of its victims at the Earthquake Relief Headquarters. Today, I will describe the situation immediately after the earthquake.

On January 17, 1995, at 5:46 A.M., the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake struck. It was extremely violent and had a magnitude of 7.2 on the Japanese seismic scale. Its epicenter was directly beneath a major metropolitan area populated by 3 million people and served by a highly

developed infrastructure.

I was awakened by the violent vertical jolting as the earth bucked up and down with a thunderous roar. At that time of the morning in winter, it is still pitch-black outside and because the power lines were down, there was no light anywhere. Initially I was totally confused and disoriented. Once I realized that there had been an earthquake, I gathered my family in a safer part of the house to wait for the aftershocks. There were occasional violent horizontal tremors for a while, then things finally calmed down somewhat. With the aid of a flashlight I inspected each room of the house. The furniture had been tossed about and there were pieces of broken dishes littering the floor; it was a terrible mess. Knowing that no trains were running, I headed for City Hall first by car, then by taxi. Along the way there were many roads blocked by fallen buildings and fires had broken out here and there. The entire city had been horribly transfigured overnight.

I eventually managed to reach City Hall at about 6:50 a.m. Of the three buildings housing City Hall, one of them suffered the collapse of its 6th floor. Inside

City Hall the lights were out, the elevators were useless, and the floor was strewn with desks, filing cabinets, and documents. Nothing had been spared, except our lives. When I looked at a section of collapsed ceiling, a safe weighing nearly 230 pounds that had fallen over, and filing cabinets resting on top of desks, I was shaken by the thought of how many more people would have died and been injured if the earthquake had struck later, during working hours.

The first and second floors of City Hall were jammed with people living in the neighborhood who had fled their homes in their pajamas; at the peak, nearly 1,000 people sought refuge there. In the neighborhood of City Hall, some buildings had tilted and others had buckled, the air was filled with the odor of escaping gas and the roads had caved in in some places, proving how powerful the tremors there had been.

The mayor, who was chief of our Earthquake Relief Headquarters, and the deputy-mayor, who was vice-chief, had showed up at about 6:30 A.M. and when I saw them, they were busy gathering information about the situation in the surrounding areas.

The Earthquake Relief Headquarters was formed at 7:00 A.M. but because most municipal employees had great difficulty getting to their posts, it took a long time to gather any kind of precise information.

Although nearly 80% of Kobe's municipal employees live within the city, very few live downtown. With the railway lines of all eight railway companies out of operation and the roads blocked with debris or jammed with traffic, it was almost impossible to get in or out of the city. In addition to being hindered by the chaotic transportation situation, many employees were forced to deal with the tragedy of a family member being killed or injured or the destruction of their homes. There were also some who were busy fighting fires or digging out survivors in their own neighborhoods. For these reasons, it was extremely difficult to mobilize the staff and only 40% had showed up by the evening of the 17th.

Regarding our attempts to gather information, the Fire Department's emergency telephone system, dial 119, was paralyzed by the tremendous number of calls coming in at the same time. The elevated monitoring cameras that

had been set up in three locations within the city were knocked out of commission by the power failure and violent tremors. With most of our modern systems of communication rendered useless, we had to rely on the more traditional method of gathering information: asking each person who arrived what he or she had seen. Fortunately, the emergency radio system linking City Hall to the ward offices and fire departments still worked and later in the morning we were able to get aerial surveillance information from helicopters.

Regarding the rescue and medical treatment of the earthquakes victims, the lack of ability to grasp the state of affairs at hospitals and other medical facilities greatly hampered our efforts. Moreover, the roads were so jammed that it was nearly impossible to transport the injured or medicine and medical equipment. Our municipal hospitals were too badly damaged to be able to function as centers of medical treatment.

At the same time, countless fires had broken out in various parts of the city, some of which developed into major conflagrations, especially in the older residential neighborhoods where wooden houses stood close together.

The Kobe City Fire Department was overwhelmed by the task of trying to extinguish all those fires, so we asked for assistance from the fire departments of other municipalities to help us contain the fires. However, because the earthquake had ruptured the water mains, most fire hydrants were useless, and because the roads were blocked or jammed with traffic, fire-fighting activities too were severely hampered.

At the Earthquake Relief Headquarters formed at each ward office, on the front lines of the attempt to deal with the disaster, a small number of staff members were kept extremely busy trying to cope with the situation. They opened refuge centers; secured provisions, blankets, and other supplies for refugees, whose number reached nearly 230,000 at the peak; cared for the dead, of which there were 4,500 within the city, including securing space for laying them out, witnessing post-mortem examinations, and contacting relatives; rescued survivors by digging them out of the debris; fought fires; and handled inquiries from the flood of frightened people who had no other place to go.

Because the government agencies needed time to start their rescue and relief operations, local communities were quick to act in this disaster. We saw many examples of neighbors helping each other rescue people from beneath houses and fighting fires in bucket brigades.

The greater a disaster, the more difficult it is to mobilize staff and to gather information at the site. For this reason, it is very important to improve a city's ability to respond to a emergency by improving the ability of each community so that immediate measures can be taken the moment disaster strikes.

"Protect your own life and property!" We are now trying to nurture autonomous local activities to fight disasters, fight fires, and create a concerned community by teaching people how to protect their own neighborhoods and homes.

The earthquake taught us many things, especially the importance of instant initial mobilization. We are now making a sweeping revision of our Disaster-Prevention Plan in order to be better prepared should a similar tragedy strike again.